CHAPTER 15

AFRS IN THE TRANSITION YEARS

AFN may not have carried General Eisenhower's victory message, but, thanks to Ben Hoberman, the Network did manage to scoop the world in reporting the victory over Japan.

Hoberman had returned to Paris from helping Bob Light set up the Munich station, and was Officer of the Day at AFN on Sunday, August 12, 1945. Like everyone else, he'd heard rumors that Japan was about to surrender. He decided there must be a way of determining the accuracy of the stories. "I picked up the telephone," he recounts, " and called the Japanese military attache in Bern, Switzerland. I figured I was calling a neutral country. I didn't want to be confused with communicating with the enemy."(1)

"The timing of it was marvelous. The attache, who spoke magnificent English, was crying on the telephone with me in response to my question of whether it was true that the Japanese had surrendered. He'd just gotten off the phone with the Minister of War, who had confirmed that the Japanese had surrendered. I immediately called AFN Headquarters in London with the news. I had no thoughts of simply reporting the news from Paris because it was a big story. I recognized that it should come out of our main news operation. That's how AFRS would do it."(2)

Such initiative helped give the AFN news operation the credibility to draw to it a civilian audience throughout Europe in the post-war years.

ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGES

This period of transition lacked the drama of the wartime conditions. When the American fighting man suddenly found himself with time on his hands, it became essential that he know what was going to happen in the coming weeks and months. In Europe and in the Pacific, AFRS readied itself with a series of specially-prepared programs detailing the new peacetime situation. Meanwhile, the Hollywood headquarters and the affiliates continued to send out a full schedule of entertainment programs.

Lewis' organization would undergo major changes as soon as hostilities concluded. Immediately after V-J Day, AFRS prepared an "Armed Forces Radio Service Forward Plan" for the period from November 1, 1945, to July 1, 1946. The three-volume plan set forth the premise: "The Armed Forces Radio Service will serve as long as there is a justifiable number of military personnel overseas and in the hospitals in the Zone of the Interior.

Assuming that troop withdrawals would be made rapidly, the Plan directed AFRS to begin a gradual reduction in its program services on July 1, 1946. Then, a new plan was to be drawn up "based upon the crystallization of the national policy of the War and Navy Departments."(3)

Would AFRS remain in operation once the war ended or would it wind up in mothballs to await another conflict? Although the permanence of AFRS would not come until after the Korean War, the Army's Information and Education Division approved the Forward Plan and instructed Lewis to implement it. That decision awarded continuity to the information and entertainment activities, and to two lesser known AFRS activities, the short-wave function and the Bedside Network.

AFRS had been sending out programming from studios in New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco via short-wave since 1943. Although news, sports and special events accounted for most of the schedule, some entertainment shows such as "G.I. Jive," "Melody Roundup," and "Command Performance" were also broadcast. Besides straight sportscasts, AFRS Sports produced question-and-answer shows where the on-the-air replies sometimes featured responses directly from athletes and coaches. Because of the daily limitations on the numbers of hours the OWI transmitters could operate, AFRS either edited most of the baseball and football games before putting them on the air or recreated them from teletype accounts.

Despite the presumption that sports programming would be the most popular short-wave broadcasts, the Army News Service found that "interest in sports is variable and spotty. The longer men have been away from home, the less interest they seem to have in stateside sports."(7) As troops rotated from overseas and new replacements came from the United States, sports would once again become the centerpiece of the short-wave operation.

After the war, the New York office broadcast three hours a day over four transmitters to Europe, the Caribbean, and the Middle East. On the West Coast, AFRS closed the San Francisco studios and Los Angeles took over the entire short-wave operation. Seven transmitters carried eleven hours of AFRS material and delivered them to the Pacific. Again, the success of the broadcasts could be measured by the quantity of fan mail that the headquarters received, not only from Armed Forces personnel, but also from foreign nationals who expressed a special interest in American programming.

THE BEDSIDE NETWORK

The other lesser-known component of AFRS, the Bedside Network, began operating during the war, supplying transcriptions to military hospitals in the United States. The headquarters in Los Angeles supplied each hospital with the Basic Music Library and the Troop Information Programs, totalling seventeen hours of material. Since patients could pick up commercial programming, too, the hospital package didn't include any decommercialized shows. During the war and for a period afterwards, AFRS distributed the Bedside Network package to the hospital circuits and let the individual facilities provide transmission. AFRS headquarters later provided technical equipment to the internal broadcast systems in the hospitals and provided training staffs to operate the stations.

Chaotic and uncertain conditions in the early post-war period mitigated against any orderly implementation of Lewis' Forward Plan. Despite the stated concerns about the problems that would occur during the turnover in personnel, the actual changes in key people occurred more rapidly than anticipated. The entertainers, writers, and directors-turned-soldiers wanted to return to their jobs in commercial radio as soon as possible. In addition, since Lewis had recruited most of his staff early in the war, many had accumulated enough points to qualify for discharge.

Lewis tried from the beginning of the transition period to prepare AFRS for the new challenges of peacetime. In the September 17, 1945, edition of *AFRS Playback*, Lewis told the staff, "Your job in the war just passed has been one of the greatest. You've suffered hardships, undergone many privations, yet you've done this willingly because you know what Armed Forces Radio programs and services have meant to our troops." Lewis said the men's future in radio would be enhanced because of the AFRS experience. "Before we all return to that life we've dreamed about for so long, let's be sure that one challenge we prepared AFRS to meet is still before it--the challenge of assuring the continuation of AFRS as long as there's a need."

Lewis left AFRS on October 25, 1945, and returned to Young and Rubicam, as Vice President in charge of the agency's radio operation. Major Martin Work, who had replaced True Boardman in Lewis' Executive Officer, assumed command of the organization pending the assignment of a regular Army Officer. By the middle of '46, a semblance of a civilian production staff had begun to emerge.

Command of AFRS remained within the military as a joint Army-Navy (and later Air Force) function. Operational control rested with the Radio Section, Troop Information Branch, Troop Information & Education Division, Special Staff, Department of the Army. In contrast to the war years, when Lewis made the policy decisions for AFRS, policy oversight passed to Washington in the post-war period. The Los Angeles headquarters now had responsibility for executing the, production, distribution, technical advice and technical supply. The broadcasting know-how, previously supplied by professional radio people in uniform, now came from civilians choosing to work for the government rather than in commercial radio. The evolution of this combined military/civilian operation became the cornerstone of the peacetime Armed Forces Radio Service.

POST-WAR PROGRAMMING

Larry Gelbart, of later "M*A*S*H" fame, arrived at AFRS in early 1946 as a Private. After going through basic training, he received his assignment as a writer working on "Command Performance." Continuing its wartime format, the program answered letters from the troops asking for the appearance of particular entertainers. At times when the program had a commitment from a personality but no request, Gelbart simply manufactured a letter.(8)

Throughout Gelbart's year of writing solely for "Command Performance," the program retained its high caliber, thanks to civilian director/producer Claire Weidnaar and the continued access to such entertainers as Frank Sinatra, Crosby and Hope. With an end to wartime tensions and the need to take the men's minds off impending combat, the sketches and dialogue sounded more like commercial radio. The program still tried to entertain the troops much as it had done during the war, but the staff was directing its material "more for the boys away from home than for troops in danger or who wouldn't come back," Gelbart said.(9)

These days, the military nature of AFRS became less significant. "It was peacetime," Gelbart notes. "The ranks were very thin. I remember I treated myself to an officers' uniforms even though I was a Sergeant. There was no red tape nor military formalities. It was just like working on a regular radio show." Nevertheless, Gelbart did occasionally pull night duty to guard the facility.

"I think my job was to prevent people from stealing jokes or something," he quips.

Like his wartime counterparts, Gelbart was able to moonlight on civilian radio shows.

"Nobody seemed to mind."(10)

Despite the continued production of "Command Performance," AFRS began to experience a decline in the production of in-house programs. There was a loss of services from the entertainment community, changes in personnel and the need to economize on all production activities. At the end of the war, the Hollywood head-

quarters was turning out twenty hours a week of original programming. Although AFRS brought in civilian writers, producers and musicians to work with the new uniformed staff, they represented a cost directly chargeable to each production. That hadn't been the case during the war. By the beginning of 1947, AFRS had reduced its original productions to fourteen-hours a week. Peacetime versions of "Command Performance," "G.I. Jill," and other programs continued on a smaller scale than the wartime shows.

The remaining forty-one hours of weekly program material sent out in the transcription package came from the commercial networks.

Important for the basic mission of AFRS, 1947 saw the beginning of a new information and education program. Previously, the Troop Information activity had been primarily a wartime device. It informed the troops about the reasons for the war and to prepare them for a return to civilian life or as an occupying army. The new program had a different emphasis. Its foundation was in the historical aspects of the military and the American way of life. Its educational component taught the soldier about his heritage in order to foster pride in his service and country. AFRS included in the program package suitable programs from the commercial networks, and produced in-house original live documentaries.

Between 1947 and 1953, AFRS produced nineteen series that portrayed the virtues of the American way.

One show, "Ambassador of Good Will," portrayed American soldiers in occupied zones as ambassadors of American ideals and democratic ideas. "This Is The Story," later called "Liberty Theater," presented selected dramatizations that stressed the ideas of the American way of life as exemplified in both contemporary and historical episodes. "The Pendleton Story" dramatized a boy and his family in the new nation from 1776 to 1801. And, each episode of "Medal of Honor" honored a different man who had earned the nations' highest award.

While stressing the virtues of life in the United States, the service also took special care to portray the negative side of the Soviet Union. "This is Russia" presented life in the Soviet Union as supposedly seen through the eyes of a typical Soviet citizen. "Anti-communism" first dramatized actual incidents within the Soviet Union or its satellites. After the first 26 programs, the series shifted its setting to Springfield, U.S.A. to show what could happen if communism took over America.

While the production of these live information and education programs increased, entertainment shows decreased. This was not only because of the cost of programming, but also because of a growing reluctance of leading performers to appear on a regular basis. Bob Hope, for one, said in 1948: "I'll do one show per year for the Army -- that's all. I feel obligated to do other benefits just as important to my country, like cancer, Red Cross, USO, and so forth."

To a significant degree, the talent problem didn't center so much on obtaining the occasional services of big show business stars, but with the hiring of *supporting* actors and musicians. During the war years, supporting actors and musicians used on the entertainment programs had received a token fee under arrangements worked out with the various guilds. The average rate was $10 for a 30-minute program with a minimum two-hour rehearsal. The agreement continued until 1947 when the American Federation of Theatrical, Radio Actors (AFTRA) and the American Federation of Musicians (AFM) asked for a review of the previous concessions. AFTRA felt that the rate was no longer equitable in view of rising living costs and the lack of a military emergency. The musicians guild, whose members had a slightly higher rate of compensation under the wartime agreement, asked that its members receive the full transcription rate when they performed in the future. After all, AFM argued, AFRS continued to enjoy free and unlimited license to use all recorded and network music in making up its transcription packages.

AFRS negotiated a compromise that established a uniform concession arrangement for both guilds. The agreement provided for slight, stepped increases in the compensation over a five-year-period until 1952. Then the guild members would receive a fee pegged at one-third of the prevailing commercial transcription rate. On its part, AFRS had to accept two conditions. First, the compensation rate was to be based on a minimum number of musicians and actors expected to be hired during one year's production operation. Second, unemployed actors and musicians were to have preferential hiring rights.

While this settlement made it more difficult to fund AFRS in-house productions, it didn't mean that the communications industry lacked an appreciation for the importance of military radio. While manufacturers of ships, planes, tanks and other munitions enjoyed profits from government contracts, both AFM and AFTRA have continued to grant many concessions to the Armed Forces. In 1948, AFM had specifically exempted AFRS from its year-long national recording ban that affected all recording companies. AFM also actively supported the peacetime version of the "Jubilee" series in 1946 and 1947. The organization paid the musicians directly out of its Welfare and Music for the Wounded Fund at a cost of more than $35,000.

The increased cost of production for AFRS created problems in its continued efforts to maintain high quality.

By 1950, the organization reached the conclusion that it could not maintain both information and entertainment programming within the allotted fund structure. Deferring to its primary mission, AFRS opted to devote its resources to education and information. As a result, the headquarters ended "Command Performance" and other live entertainment shows during that year. To replace the in-house entertainment productions, AFRS increased its use of decommercialized network and local programs to sixty hours a week.

From then on, the Hollywood headquarters operated primarily as a distribution center for news, information, and entertainment programming. It functioned secondarily as the producer of education and information material geared exclusively to Americans in uniform.

"Command Performance," "Mail Call," "Jubilee," and all the other classic original AFRS programs had been aberrations. Only the unique wartime conditions, demanding an all-out effort from the nations' entertainers, made them possible. In peacetime, however, troops in remote areas would undoubtedly benefit more from the familiar entertainment they'd enjoyed back home. This included not only the top-rated network programs, but the in-house AFRS music shows, produced using local disc jockeys and AFRS civilian employees.

The Armed Forces Radio Service that emerged from the transition held fast to the mission and the guidelines it had established in '42. It still broadcast command information and education. It still provided regularly scheduled news and entertainment programs little different from those broadcast in the United States.

Now it had a new combined civilian/military staff, a limited budget and a new reliance on decommercialized programs. The Armed Forces Radio Service could only fondly remember those classic programs of its infancy, and the excitement and creativity that so distinguished it in the wartime operations.

But, they weren't through making history.

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(1) Hoberman interview.
(2) Ibid.
(3) *Armed Forces Radio Service Forward Plan,* November 1, 1945, to July 1, 1946.
(4) Ibid.
(5) Ibid.
(6) Ibid.
(7) *William Murphy to Army News Service Personnel,* August 6, 1945.
(8) Interview with Larry Gelbart, August 4, 1943.
(9) Ibid.
(10) Ibid.